

The material trajectories of cultural texts: *The Bookseller of Kabul* and the ahistoric women of Afghanistan

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Abstract

This article elaborates the usefulness of material culture studies for research on contemporary cultural products by representing books as transformable objects with social lives, the investigation of which is needed to better understand their social dimensions in times of global cultural flows. The article discusses the case of a controversial literary bestseller, *The Bookseller of Kabul*, from the perspective of its globally circulating material embodiments. By following the changing peritexts of this international bestseller, the article investigates how specific interpretations of the book proliferate. Special focus is placed on the ahistorical construction of Afghan women in the peritexts of the book.

Keywords: Afghan women, book studies, critical feminism, material culture, paratexts, social life of things

Introduction

In autumn of 2002, Norwegian publisher Cappelen published a book by Norwegian author Åsne Seierstad. The book, *Bokhandleren i Kabul*, portrayed on its front cover a young boy in front of a bookshelf (Seierstad 2002a). In 2004, Back Bay Books, a publisher in the United States (US), published a book in English with the title *The Bookseller of Kabul* (Seierstad 2004). Many would say that these two books are the same (one simply being a translation of the other), but on closer inspection, differences are evident. The US front cover does not portray a boy or a bookshelf; instead, it shows two women wearing burqas. Inside this edition, the reader also finds four pages of blurbs, a modified foreword, and two appendices, none of which form part of the first edition.

Are these observations about different covers and additional pages mere curiosities

that, at best, might arouse the interest of a handful of future bibliophiles? Or could these transformations have relevance for a wider audience interested in the current socio-political conjunctures around cultural production?

This article argues for the latter interpretation. It proposes that more attention should be paid to the trajectories of cultural goods and texts, as well as to their material transformations. Or, to use Arjun Appadurai's (1986) phrasing, we need methodologies which better acknowledge that cultural artifacts, such as books, have social lives and that these lives are inscribed in their material embodiments. Eventually, this allows us to better understand how globally circulating cultural texts operate in the field of power and how, in this case, *The Bookseller of Kabul* helped to construct – and was itself constructed by – a uniform image of Afghanistan and the so-called Afghan woman.¹

Methodologically, this article rests on a dialogue between material culture studies and literary studies, and is comprised of two sections: first, it discusses the theoretical incentives for paying more attention to the material aspects of literature and transformations. Then, it offers an empirical case study concerning the paratexts of *The Bookseller of Kabul*. The case study concentrates on the issue of Afghan women, their representations and the uses of these representations across the different global editions of the book. This is done by analysing different editions, peritexts and cover images of this globally circulating book. Consequently, the article investigates how certain interpretations of Afghan women gain material support and power in the *biography* of the book and how these readings coincide with certain ahistoric images of Muslim women (for biographies of things, see Kopytoff 1986). The aims of the article are, thus, twofold: first, it demonstrates how following the material trajectories of a text may reveal the ways in which changes in an object reshape its symbolic meanings, and second, it shows how in the case of *The Bookseller of Kabul* these changes serve to frame the story of an individual family in ways that strengthen the ahistoric image of the Muslim woman as a figure who needs to be saved – even if this means state violence against Muslim populations.

The materially transforming book

Questions concerning matter and materiality have recently interested scholars across the humanities and social sciences. The various theorists of material culture studies, the posthuman

paradigm and new materialist discourse have enabled matter to appear as an epistemologically and ontologically unavoidable topic. The interest has been so wide that some have even referred to a material turn (Hicks 2010), and a large number of handbooks have been released regarding material culture studies (see, e.g., Buchli 2002; Hicks and Beaudry 2010; Miller 2005; Tilley 2006; Woodward 2007). These different emerging theoretical traditions share interest in objects, things, and materialities in *everyday* situations. The term material culture emphasizes how apparently inanimate things act on people, and are acted upon by people, “for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity” (Woodward 2007: 3). Similarly, in science and technology studies, the issue of materiality has been important for scholars like Bruno Latour and John Law, who have written the key texts of the so-called actor-network theory.

These discussions have gradually entered the field of culture. A number of visual art and music scholars have been inspired by the work of actor-network theorists and approached art as materially supported processes (see, e.g., De la Fuente 2007; DeNora 2000; Hennion 1997). In studies closer to literature, Ailsa Craig (2011: 49) has for example noted that cultural studies would do well to pay more attention to the physicality of objects, like books, which are often seen as conduits of meaning rather than as constitutive of meaning. A similar argument has been made by Paul Duguid (1996: 79), according to whom books are not ‘dead things’ which carry preformed information, but are themselves crucial agents and means of production. Finally, Katherine N. Hayles (2002: 131) has noted that focusing ‘on materiality allows us to see the dynamic interactivity through which a literary work mobilizes its physical embodiment in conjunction with its verbal signifiers to construct meanings in ways that implicitly construct the user/reader as well’.

Focusing on materiality in literature can mean an increased interest in the production and dissemination of books. For example, the authors of the collection *Reading books: essays on the material text and literature in America* have attempted to ‘situate the material text within those webs of production, dissemination, and consumption that constitute and determine meaning in any given place and time’ (Moylan and Stiles 1996: 3). They also emphasise the importance of transformations by suggesting that reprinted texts, in particular, present fruitful case studies, given that how texts are repackaged says much about their social uses. ‘Every edition of a text, every printing that adopts a different set of advertisements,

every version with a different cover is a different literary object – a different configuration of the forces that shape meaning’ (ibid: 6).²

Drawing inspiration from these studies, this article applies the idea of materially oriented research to a contemporary trade book and describes its social life as it is embodied in its various material forms. What is interesting about *The Bookseller of Kabul* is not only how it was originally written or what the original edition includes, but how it becomes rewritten, modified, reacted to and written about, and, consequently, what these transformations reveal about the operations of power.³

Concretely, these theoretical questions will be elaborated by using Gerard Genette’s (2001) concept of paratexts, i.e., texts (verbal or not) that surround, prolong and accompany the text which is usually regarded as the literary text. Examples of accompanying texts are forewords, author interviews, reviews and back-cover texts. For Genette (ibid: 1–2), the ‘paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers ... More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*’. Genette focuses on literature, but paratexts are present in all cultural production: films have titles, and DVD releases include extras, visual art is often accompanied by exhibition catalogues, and music is reviewed and advertised.

In literature, many paratexts reflect how professional readers have responded to the text and how the reading experiences of readers have been – or have tried to be – organised. As Michael Kearns (1996: 6) notes, this extraneous material reflects what professional readers (or those working at the producing end) have thought of the manuscript and also influences the ‘horizon of expectations’ within which other readers read those words. A horizon of expectations (a term coined by Hans-Robert Jauss [1982]), suggests there is a certain mind-set, horizon or distinct perspective from which each reader reads. Kearns (1996) suggests that these horizons are constructed particularly effectively by such elements as endpapers, title pages, running titles and advertisements – in other words, by paratexts. These materially supported messages are the object of the empirical analysis below.

The bookseller of Kabul

The case of *The Bookseller of Kabul* is rich in detail, and thus it helps to demonstrate what a material culture-inspired study of an individual book can mean.

The Norwegian journalist Åsne Seierstad wrote *Bokhandleren i Kabul* after living in Kabul for a few months in 2002, in the home of the Rais family, in order to write a book. The book mainly discusses their life, sketching an intimate portrayal of one large family living in Afghanistan. In the literary text, the family is named Khan, but otherwise the book is defined as a true story by its author and its original publisher.

The Bookseller of Kabul is worth investigating not least because it was a bestseller: according to Seierstad's agent, during its first eight years of publication (2002–2010), the book sold 'definitely more' than two million copies worldwide (Høier 2010). During these years, its rights were sold to 41 countries, which means *The Bookseller of Kabul* was released in numerous different forms. Moreover, the book was also interesting because it had a politically topical theme, Afghanistan, and because it was criticised by the family it portrayed. In 2003, the father of the family, Shah Muhammed Rais, began a public campaign against Seierstad's portrayal, claiming that the book was slanderous, contained lies and intruded on the privacy of his family (Oslo Tingrett 2010). In particular, Rais was unsatisfied with the portrayal of himself as a patriarch (for discussion on the controversy, see Myhre 2004).⁴

The next part of this article introduces avenues of research that are opened up once a book is investigated as a materially embodied agent. This exploration concentrates particularly on one area of opinion formation: Afghan women, their representations and the uses of these representations across the different global editions of *The Bookseller of Kabul*.

The globally circulating book

As mentioned earlier, the materiality of *The Bookseller of Kabul* is variable due to the vast number of different international editions. The data used in this article include 32 different editions and 69 front covers, as well as 30 back covers of *The Bookseller of Kabul*. These editions are stored in the National Library of Norway. The collection of cover images was supplemented by images found on the internet, and eight cover designers of the book were interviewed to find out what had initiated the transformations⁵ (this material was collected in 2009 and 2010). The different covers of *The Bookseller of Kabul* offer rich data for closer investigation. The transformations of these peritexts can be grouped into two categories: changes to the *covers* and changes to the *texts between the covers*.

As noted at the beginning of this article, when the book was first released in Norway,

its front cover portrayed a boy in front of a bookshelf (see Figure 1). Almost simultaneously the book was released in Sweden with the title *Bokhandlaren i Kabul* and portrayed four adult women and three children on its front cover, one of the children being a boy (see Figure 1; Seierstad 2002b). None of these persons wore a burqa. In this sense, the book had two ‘original’ covers. Later, it became known that both covers portrayed members of the real Rais family (Oslo Tingrett 2010).



Figure 1: A selection of the different covers of *Bokhandlaren i Kabul*

Several international publishers used one or the other of these two photographs for their covers, while others changed the cover image, with the result that most covers which do not portray the boy in the bookshop or the family, portray a woman/women. Moreover, most of

the featured women are shown wearing a burqa or some form of veil. A total of 69 front covers were analysed for this research, of which 31 show *different* cover images (if slightly modified versions portraying the same image are excluded). Of these 31 images, 18 portray only females; five portray both males and females (in one image, the people resemble a family); five portray only males; and three do not portray people or the gender is not recognisable. (Persons under burqas were counted as female.)

In short, the most obvious shift in the covers of *The Bookseller of Kabul* was from the two-male or family-oriented original covers to a cluster of female-dominated covers. Of the 23 covers that feature women, the majority are veiled or wearing burqas. One image, which portrays Seierstad herself, includes neither a veil nor a burqa, and one image portrays a woman hiding her face with her hands. However, the remaining 21 images depict women wearing either a veil or a burqa. Few of these covers have anything to do with books or bookselling, which was the theme on the cover of the first Norwegian edition and is the theme the title emphasises. Of the 31 different images, only four include books in one form or another, none of the new images portray families; rather, they denote a more general category of anonymous women.

How should one analyse the fact that a significant number of the covers portray veiled or burqa-clothed women? Could these transformations be read as a sign of a globally shared understanding of the book? According to the research, the answer is 'no'. It would be closer to the point to say that rather than being rooted in the book, this shared understanding concerns Afghanistan.

First, the cover images do not entirely correspond with the information offered by the literary text. Only one chapter out of 19 in *The Bookseller of Kabul* discusses the burqa, asserting that all the women in the Rais/Khan family have abandoned theirs:

Leila has given up the burka. ... Sonya and Sharifa followed suit. It was easy for Sharifa; she had lived most of her adult life with her face uncovered. It was worse for Sonya. (Seierstad 2004: 266)

Still, despite the text, in their ostensible diversity, the international covers almost unanimously adopted and spread the image of the burqa.

Second, the covers cannot be said to reflect the literary text, because not all cover designers had read the book. Five out of the eight who were interviewed by email, admitted they had not read the entire book, two did not answer that particular question, and only the US paperback designer confirmed having read it. Changes in the covers could not be primarily subordinated to the literary text if the designers had not read the text. Additionally, though many designers had not seen other covers of the book or had seen only one or two of them, they still came to the same conclusion about the importance of the veiled woman. Moreover, some designers who used photographs selected pictures from the collections of international press agencies (such as Magnum Photos and Getty Images). In this way the image of Afghanistan (and the book) was determined by these agencies, rather than by the literary text.

Through the work of these mediators, who had not necessarily read the book, the veils and burqas came to dominate the international editions of *The Bookseller of Kabul* and, most likely, the readers' horizon of expectations. At first glance, this transformation may appear strange. However, looking deeper, it reflects a historically strong discourse.

In *Colonial fantasies*, Meyda Yegenoglu (1998) describes a Western tendency to produce a metonymic association between the Orient and its women, between tradition and women. Doing a feminist reading of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), Yegenoglu (ibid: 98–99) notes that in Western images of Muslim countries, 'the most essential features of the culture are assumed to be inscribed onto her [the Muslim woman]; she is taken as the concrete embodiment of oppressive Islamic tradition'. Pamela Pears (2007) makes similar observations when investigating the front covers used for various books that introduce Algerian women's writing to Western audiences. According to her, the desire to sell the Algerian woman as the exotic other has translated into a regressively monolithic project (ibid: 162). Pears shows that regardless of the books' varying messages, the covers depict nameless, veiled women.

In other words, more often than not, the metonymy described by Yegenoglu includes the veil, which is accompanied by certain political implications: the 'metonymic association between tradition and woman' explains 'the continual obsession and the fundamental weight given to women's unveiling as the privileged sign of progress' (Yegenoglu 1998: 129–130). Taken as the most visible marker of tradition and religion, 'the veil provided the benevolent

Western woman with what she had desired: a clinching example that interlocks “woman” and “tradition/Islam” so that it could be morally condemned in the name of emancipation’ (Yegenoglu 1998: 99). The same has been noted by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1986: 347), who identifies a universalist and universalising tendency of Western feminists to make an ‘analytic leap from the practice of veiling to an assertion of its general significance in controlling women’. She asserts that the veiled woman has become a universal, ahistorical image that has set in motion a colonialist discourse which maintains existing first/third world connections (ibid: 352–353). In the case of Muslim countries, this has quite univocally meant that representations of women and their bodies have come to play a central role in discourses of domination.

The above statement can be grounded in a lengthy series of historical observations (e.g., Ahmed 1992; Said 1979; Yegenoglu 1998), but with equal ease, we can find significant examples of it in the 21st century and in the context of the war in Afghanistan. According to Lila Abu-Lughod (2003), the era after 9/11 has been marked by heightened interest in Muslim women’s bodies, hence the war in Afghanistan is often considered in the press to be a feminist event. Similarly, for Sherene H. Razack (2004: 130), in the invasion of Afghanistan, ‘the Taliban’s treatment of Afghan women far overshadowed the historical context in which they gained power, a context in which the United States played an active role’. Judith Butler (2009: 26) makes similar arguments in *The frames of war*, in which she claims that ‘[s]exually progressive conceptions of feminist rights or sexual freedoms have been mobilized ... to rationalize wars against predominantly Muslim populations’ (see also Jarmakani [2007] in the context of Iraq).

In the specific context of Afghanistan, the visual focus on the veil and female oppression is in a curious relation to some images of Afghanistan that were circulating in the 1960s and 1970s, when it was considered a country on its way to liberalisation. At that time, the globally circulating visual imagery of Afghanistan (and above all Kabul) included images of urbanisation, construction work, female education and the Afghan-coated hippie tourist. In the 1980s, global imageries concentrated on the Soviet occupation and the problems of refugees, Steve McCurry’s photograph of a then teenager, Sharbat Gula, being an iconic example of this period. Thus, at least in the context of Afghanistan, the term ‘ahistoric’ rather refers to the currently dominant image, which has managed to obscure historical variations in

visual representations of Afghanistan.

The changing covers of *The Bookseller of Kabul* follow the currently dominant discourse, which is characterised by anonymous, veiled women. The covers share obvious similarities with the discourse described by Yegenoglu (1998), Mohanty (1986) and those who criticise the conjunction between feminist claims and the current wars. The covers also follow the representational patterns often used when Arab women are portrayed to US audiences as silent, hidden or cloistered away (Jarmakani 2007). A majority of the covers portray ahistoric women, and only a few refer in any way to a specific historical context or even to Afghanistan. Many of the photos have been cropped, bringing the women closer to the viewer. A good example is a Polish edition in which the cover image zooms in on the eye-grid of a burqa, showing no other parts of the woman or her surroundings. In many cases these images were distributed by international press agencies, before being selected by designers who had not read the book.

This is where the agency of the physical object – the book – starts to emerge. In its peritexts, the physical object has started to carry messages and meanings that go beyond the literary text. These peritexts that travel with the literary object have acquired lasting material support and have, thus, become agents of their own.

Actor-network theorists have discussed the role of such material support in constructing and reproducing human relations and evaluations. For example, according to Latour (2000) and Law (1991), what we call a ‘social relation’ becomes stabilised when it interacts with materials and objects. Law (ibid: 166) writes that

to understand the social, and, more particularly, to understand what it is that stabilizes social relations to generate power effects we have ... to make sense of the way in which the ‘social’ interacts with and is constituted by ... materials.

Artifacts might even be the factors that literally construct social order and make it durable or expansive, suggests Latour (2000: 113). The ability of paratexts to construct thresholds of interpretations and social order is most forcefully present in peritexts – in other words, paratexts that are located before, after and/or in the middle of the literary text in the same volume (e.g., forewords and epilogues). From the perspective of material culture studies, it is

peritexts in particular that are significant, compared to the other type of paratexts, epitexts, which have a bearing on the literary text but are physically distant from it (e.g., literary reviews). Given that peritexts are part of the physicality of the cultural product itself, and that they travel with the artifact, they have acquired material support that is more lasting and more effective than, for example, media commentaries. Following from this, cover images, supported by the materiality of the travelling book, are powerful interpretations that may stabilise social relations (i.e., certain interpretations of a literary text) at the expense of other interpretations. Through its peritexts, a physical object can begin to carry messages and meanings that go beyond the literary text. As Hayles (2002: 131) notes, the physical form of a literary artifact always affects what the words (and other semiotic components) mean. Alternatively, to follow Kearns' (1996) use of the term 'horizon of expectations', these expectations are constructed by peritexts with particular force.

The cover images discussed earlier constitute one set of material modifications in the global biography of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, but the changes in the peritexts are not restricted to these images. Unlike the first edition, certain later editions include so-called 'extras', the most important being two added peritexts in the US paperback edition: (1) 'A conversation with the author of *The Bookseller of Kabul*' and (2) a reading-group guide entitled 'Questions and topics for discussion'. According to the text, the author herself generated both appendices (Seierstad 2004, Reading group guide).

The practice of inserting reading-group guides or peritexts associated with the opinions of the author is becoming more common, particularly in paperback publishing, but these extras usually receive little critical attention. The same is true in the critical reception of movies: the extras are seldom perceived as part of the work, even if they constitute significant thresholds of interpretation.

What kind of thresholds did the peritexts of the US paperback edition of *The Bookseller of Kabul* offer? The reading-group guide, located at the end of the volume, includes 12 questions, of which seven focus on gender issues – more precisely, on marriage; different female roles; relations between female and male members of the family; women and education, as well as women and the Taliban; Sultan as a man and his behaviour at home; the opportunities for young men; and Seierstad as a woman. Only one question refers to books and publishing.

Above, the growing emphasis on gender, as reflected on the various covers, was discussed. The transforming covers shifted the focus from the private sphere of the family to Afghan women in general. These cover transformations found parallels in the reading-group guide that emphasised gender-related questions and general social questions instead of the private sphere. This shift from the private and the particular to the social and the general was strengthened through the use of Afghanistan as a general category in the questions. The guide asks: 'How does fashion reflect the social changes *in Afghanistan*?'; 'How do female roles *in Afghanistan* differ?' and 'Discuss the ways in which marriages are agreed upon and carried out *in Afghan society*' (emphasis added) (Seierstad 2004, Reading group guide: 7–9).

Consequently, the guide discusses the private and individual story of the family as a generalisable story of Afghanistan. 'Afghan society' and 'Afghanistan' are used as points of reference or general categories that can be discussed based on this one reading experience. The guide does not ask how 'marriages are agreed upon and carried out in the *Khan family*' but in 'Afghan society'. Neither does it ask 'how female roles in the *Khan family* differ' but encourages the reader to think about the different roles 'in Afghanistan'. The individual story of a particular family is offered as a source for making general – even ahistoric and asubjective – observations. Thus, the reading-group guide sets aside any hesitations regarding whether the family in the book should be seen as a typical Afghan family.

All this is in curious relation to the foreword, which states that the family is *not* a typical Afghan family, but rather a wealthy and liberal household:

It is important to emphasise that this is the story of *one* Afghan family. There are many millions of others. My family is not even typical. It is kind of middle-class, if one can use that expression in Afghanistan. (Seierstad 2004: 7)

The reading group guide, however, which spatially (and, most likely, temporally) follows the reading of the literary text and the foreword, emphasises the typical and generalisable nature of the family. The other added peritext, the conversation with the author, does not change this impression. The conversation forms part of an interview with Seierstad, originally published in the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* on 9 November 2003, a few months after the Rais family started the public controversy. Still, the conversation does not discuss the critical views of the

family, nor is the author confronted with critical questions. On the contrary, the conversation works as a space where the author can restate her perspective on gender issues and reiterate authority over the text.

Referring to Sultan Khan (Shah Muhammed Rais), this peritext reveals that

[s]oon after Seierstad started living with Khan's extended family, however, she saw another side of the bookseller that differed from her initial impressions. Sultan Khan – he is in his fifties, although his exact age is not known because of shoddily kept birth records – firmly ruled over his household, his word being final on all decisions. (Seierstad 2004, Reading group guide: 2)

Later, the peritext quotes Seierstad as saying about Sultan Khan: 'He's an Afghan patriarch like everybody else' (ibid: 3).

According to Marie Maclean (1991), paratexts lend the text authority. She suggests that they may even open up new considerations of authorial and editorial 'intention'. Because paratexts are often informative and advising, even persuading, Maclean (ibid.) notes that research might direct us to places where the author displays these intentions, where s/he speaks to the readers as a sender to receivers. The conversation-with-the-author peritext falls into the category Maclean discusses: it gives reading instructions, is informative as well as advising, and is a space where the author displays intention. Thus, it lends authority to, and restates, a specific interpretation of the book – an interpretation that had been called into question by the real family in epitexts. Thus, the patriarchal structures that oppress women are highlighted in one more authoritative text surrounding the original literary text and that is supported by the materiality of the book.

There is, of course, nothing intrinsically suspicious in peritexts such as the conversation with the author or the reading-group guide. On the contrary, they can serve the reader by giving information about the circumstances in which the book was produced. In this way, they may open up the process of reification and present the book to its readers not as a closure but as an ongoing process of meaning making.

In the case of *The Bookseller of Kabul*, however, these peritexts seem to function, above all, as instruments of control. The conversation and the reading-group guide were inserted in the midst of the controversy, and thus they should be read in relation to the

struggle over conflicting interpretations. Having their material basis in the book, the peritexts have been more durable and diffusible than most of the critical epitexts. Consequently, this gave the author and the publisher an advantage in exercising their power, since the messages of the family were not distributed with equal material support.

Conclusion

This article started by suggesting that paying more attention to the material trajectories of cultural products may offer insight into the political uses of cultural products, their modes of appropriation, and the processes through which their readers' or audience's horizons of expectations are constructed.

An investigation into the material trajectories of cultural product (in this case the book) is worthwhile if we wish to better understand the social dimensions of a given cultural artifact. Following the thing and the transformations between different editions helps one notice how *The Bookseller of Kabul* was repeatedly produced in a uniform manner, in different contexts, causing the designers and publishers to interpret it in ways that have been criticised specifically by critical feminist scholars. The book facilitated certain interpretations of Afghan women at the expense of other readings. These interpretations were supported by materials in the form of cover images and a reading-group guide. Unlike the critical remarks made by the family, which appeared only in epitexts, the physical books supported the author's and publisher's messages in the peritexts.

But what about the readers? Did they read the text differently, or perhaps subversively? They certainly might have. The covers of *The Bookseller of Kabul* and the added extras, discussed above, do not, by themselves, reveal how the book was interpreted by its readers (other than those who produced the peritexts). The private interpretations of individual readers remain outside the scope of this research.

Nevertheless, when investigated together as different aspects of the biography of the book, the changes discussed in this article offer insights into how the book was appropriated and used in different places, and how these usages built a rather uniform image of Afghan gender roles. As a mechanism, the book and its trajectories spread the image of Afghan women oppressed by ahistorical and asubjective gender roles and their burqas.

Reading differently or against hegemonic interpretations is always possible, but the

probability of these kinds of readings should be analysed in relation to the wider operations of the social and material life of the book. The interpretations of readers and other cultural audiences are relationally constructed in the conjunctures between the text, the paratexts, their material embodiments and the reader. For better or worse, subversive potentialities are either actualised or warded off relationally. Even those readers who read against the grain of peritexts will have in their minds the associations that are offered therein, and they are more likely to read within those horizons rather than outside of them. The analysis in this article has described how different procedures and their material embodiments (like peritexts) can strengthen certain interpretations while marginalising others. This is best done if we follow the trajectories of the book and its materially embodied social life.

Notes

¹ By emphasising the analytical importance of trajectories and transformations, this article reacts to certain methodological challenges characteristic of the global era. As several critics have noted, the various methods used in the social sciences and humanities have not been particularly good at describing different transnational or translocal phenomena, nor the mobile (see, e.g., Appadurai 1995; Law 2004; Law and Urry 2004; Urry 2007). These scholars have sought ways of overcoming national borders, and attempted to show 'how cultural objects are variably on the move and how they may hold [or change] their meaning as they move and are moved around' (Urry 2007: 34). When cultural texts are in a constant state of flux, moving objects, such as books, can help to capture social valuations that would otherwise remain unnoticed.

² This approach is by no means new in literary studies, but only lately has it been applied to contemporary print literature. Book historians and researchers in book studies have often worked on the various physical editions, modifications and routes of literary texts, but these scholars take their examples primarily from the past, whereas scholars working on contemporary print literature have rarely focused on modifications between editions (see, e.g., McGann 1991; Moylan and Stiles 1996; Myers, Harris and Mandelbrote 2007). With the exception of the collection *Judging a book by its covers* (Matthews and Moody 2007), contemporary popular (print) books have remained at the margins of materially oriented research. I refer to popular print books because certain niche genres, such as artists' books,

zines and electronic literature, have been studied widely in terms of their materiality, and the so-called digital humanities paradigm has discussed the issues of materiality in the context of digital literature (see, e.g., Drucker 2004; Hayles 2002). However, interest in the materiality of all textual production seems to be on the rise, perhaps due to the digitalisation of culture (see Mays and Thoburn 2013).

³ The decision to pay attention to the material object was partly motivated by the desire to find new methodologies for studying the transnational book market. The global operations of publishers constitute a challenging area for research. Despite growing similarities, the realities in different countries and companies vary significantly. Consequently, many studies concentrate on local and national circumstances, or on specific genres of publishing (e.g. academic publishing or children's literature), and are often quantitative in nature. Moreover, in recent years, a substantial body of research has concentrated on the effects of digitalisation, leaving print publishing aside. Transnational flows and procedures in book publishing are difficult to capture in detail, and many studies settle for quantitative, popular or national approaches (see, e.g., Cope and Phillips 2006; Gomez 2008; Greco 2005; Rønning and Slaatta 2012; Thompson 2005). The materially-oriented method suggested here, attempts to offer some remedy to the situation. Analysing the material embodiments of the text allows one to notice global tendencies in publishing that might otherwise remain uncovered, because such research runs the risk of being too challenging, laborious or difficult – not least because people working in the industry are not eager to share their views. This problem is illustrated by the fact that of the 18 global publishers of *The Bookseller of Kabul* that were contacted, only two responded.

⁴ Partly due to this feud, the book sparked enormous levels of public debate, mainly in Norway but elsewhere in the world as well. Later, this media scandal turned into a court case. The controversy is complex and worthy of its own article, hence I have left it aside here.

⁵ In addition to these materials, to understand the broader context around the circulating books, 20 people in Norway were interviewed on the controversy and some online ethnography was done among readers.

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